

Private U.S. contractors shortchange troops in Iraq

By Rep. Louise M. Slaughter

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The reports coming from Iraq are getting worse each day.

Amid the accounts of violence and intolerable heat, I hear disturbing stories about the conditions in which our soldiers live. A constituent whose brother is serving in Iraq describes soldiers there encountering dehydration and heat exhaustion.

Despite temperatures over 120 degrees Fahrenheit, water is still rationed at two bottles a day. A mother wrote that her son receives only two prepackaged meals daily. He must use half his water ration to reconstitute these meals. She also reports that he has little access to phones or mail. Other reports tell of soldiers living in buildings with no plumbing.

Families at home have become so concerned that they have gotten together with veterans and concerned citizens to form a coalition called "Bring Them Home Now."

This is a very troubling situation for all of our troops, especially the reservists. They left their jobs and families to perform unclear missions that have been extended for months longer than anticipated.

What is going on?

According to Brookings Institution scholar Peter W. Singer, in recent years the Pentagon has grown dramatically more dependent on private contractors to provide services to our military. Earlier this year, there was one American private-sector worker in Iraq for every 10 soldiers - compared with one for every 100 soldiers during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Even if private corporations can offer more convenient and cost-effective services than the government, their commitment must always be questioned and monitored. A commitment to profit is hardly a commitment to make the sacrifices necessary in war.

Many contractors who signed on to provide services to our soldiers have backed out of their contracts. According to Newhouse News Service, private companies that were supposed to build modular barracks, field kitchens and bathrooms refused to go to Iraq, leaving soldiers to live in "primitive, dust-blown shelters without windows."

For Iraq, the Pentagon has appointed (without bids) Halliburton as the prime contractor. Its subsidiary Brown and Root is responsible for a vast array of services, including building military bases, managing mail services and providing meals. Failure to perform should result in replacement of the prime contractor, but it is likely to only result in increased profits.

The administration has acknowledged that many of the projects to rebuild infrastructure could be done more cheaply using the United Nations or nonprofit organizations. Perhaps the administration's preference for private contracts lies in its close ties to Halliburton.

Whatever the reason, the mistreatment of our military men and women is part of a disturbing trend. Earlier this year, the administration proposed a budget that would have slashed benefits for veterans by almost \$30 billion.

The administration also denied an increase in the child tax credit to more than 200,000 active military personnel.

Sixty years ago, the military kept our troops well supplied with food, water and other essentials. And they were awarded a magnificent benefit program upon their return. So why, with all our advancements, can't we do it now?

I call on the administration to immediately investigate the care it is providing our military in Iraq and to implement a plan for improvement, as well as a plan for finishing our mission there